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The Kinsey Institute Interview Series: A Conversation with Dr. James Cantor

By Justin Lehmler

What is a day in the life of a sex researcher like?

In this interview series, I'll be talking to some of the world's foremost authorities on sex in order to answer this question, but also to provide a glimpse into what they're currently working on and what they think about some of the most pressing issues facing the field of sex research today.

For this interview, I spoke with **Dr. James Cantor**, a clinical psychologist based in Toronto who specializes

in research on unusual sexual interests. Below is the transcript of our email conversation.

Lehmiller: As a sex researcher, one of the most common questions you get asked is how you got into this line of work in the first place. So let's start there—what is it that drew you to this field of study? What's the story behind how you became a sex researcher?

Cantor: I think it was mostly dumb luck. I actually started out in computer science, doing my degree surrounded by other math-and-science folks. But I was also working as a peer counsellor in the dorms, and I eventually figured out that I was enjoying that even more than my formal studies. So, I decided to switch and try to get into clinical psychology. This was during the peak of the Dr. Ruth days, and I had come out at a time when psychology hadn't yet really grappled with LGBT issues in psychotherapy—so, I thought I'd have a niche in doing couples' therapy for gay couples. But first, to get into a competitive PhD program, I had to get some psychology experience as a research assistant, and I found a job where they trained me to do neuropsych assessments. Eventually, I found a doctoral program at McGill, where there was a professor who wanted to get a computer to do sex therapy. Who could possibly be a better match than me—someone with an interest in sex therapy who also happened to have a background in computers? I never could have planned this, of course, but it was just the right combination. The other stroke of dumb luck came at the end of my doctorate when it was time for my clinical internship. There weren't (and still aren't) many good sites for training in sex or couples therapy, but there was someplace that came close. The Clarke Institute of Psychiatry (now the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, or CAMH) provided clinical training in sex and gender related issues. While I was there



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training in treating pedophiles, they received a grant for which they needed an additional pedophilia researcher, this time with a background in...neuropsych assessment! As I said, I couldn't plan this. But my experience is that cross-pollinating fields is extremely valuable! It all worked out very well, but still feels only like a fluke.

Lehmiller: What is your primary area of research and what methods do you typically use to answer your research questions?

Cantor: My primary research opportunities have involved studying sex offenders, mostly pedophiles and persons with other atypical sexualities whose behaviours led them into the legal system. I have also been able to do some work on (so-called) hypersexuality. I've gotten to use a range of methods to get at the questions I'm trying to answer. The best known of my work used various neuropsychological and MRI techniques—these gave us very direct evidence of the association between pedophilia and the brain. Also extremely important to my research is “phallometry”: study participants (male) wear a device on their penis while they are exposed to different kinds of erotic stimuli. This procedure is extremely sensitive, quantitative, and escapes many self-report problems. Although those highly quantitative methods have provided the compelling evidence for many of my hypotheses, it was still the front-line exposure to a wide diversity of sexual issues coming into our clinic that provided the qualitative information that yielded many of those hypotheses. I think too many researchers try to do one type of research without the other.

Lehmiller: You have published research on a range of topics, including homosexuality, pedophilia, and hypersexuality. Tell us a little bit about what you're working on now.

Cantor: At the moment, I want to go big--I'm after a "Grand Unified Theory" of the atypical sexualities. Rather than viewing pedophilia and sex addiction and homosexuality and asexuality and so on as all being different ways to be different, I think they are all pieces that fit together in a bigger puzzle of how the human sexual attraction/interest/orientation system works. I don't know if I will ever get it, but I'm sure going to give it my best!

Lehmiller: As you well know, what people believe to be true about sex doesn't always match up with what the research shows. In your experience, what are some common beliefs about sex that are just plain wrong?

Cantor: It's hard for me to answer this question without first addressing how much that extremist politics have pushed people's beliefs away from the science. I point out examples both from extreme right and the extreme left. On the right, we have folks who believe in "reparative therapy" to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals, despite research showing the failure of such therapies and documentation of its harm. On the left, however, we have folks who oppose helping transgender children to be happy with their sex of birth, despite all the research showing that the great majority of such kids turn out to be gay or lesbian in adulthood, but cisgender instead of trans. It has become very difficult to discuss the science of these issues at all, without the conversation degrading entirely into politics.

Within my own field, I think the most common belief about sex that's just plain wrong is that "pedophilia" is a synonym for "child molestation." Pedophilia refers to the actual sexual interest (or "orientation") towards children, and child molestation refers to the overt behaviour. I've found that once people appreciate that distinction, they start to appreciate what it must be like

for a person to realize that—through no fault of his own—he is attracted to children, but chooses to live a life of celibacy rather than molest a child. In making just that distinction, we suddenly find ourselves feeling sympathy where we didn't think possible.

Lehmiller: You are actively involved in the dissemination of sex science through both popular media interviews and Twitter. However, the topics you've spoken publicly about, such as pedophilia, are rather controversial and polarizing. As a result, you've encountered a fair amount of resistance and criticism along the way. So how do you attempt to combat this? How do you try to reach people who don't necessarily want to hear what you're saying?

Cantor: Lots of people have strong opinions about lots of aspects of sex. The debates and public reactions have depended on the nature of the sexual minority under discussion, the personalities of the activists involved, and (maybe even most) on the leadership of whichever forum hosted the debate. Wikipedia, for example, has a complete process and open forum with an arbitration committee to whom evidence could be brought and discussed. Wikipedia supported my dissemination of science over the activists who disliked what the science said. Reddit, however, banned me from posting in the psychology group because a single moderator disliked that same science, but there was no open process (nor appeal I could find). So, in that forum, each moderator apparently has the authority to censor open discussion of legitimate science.

The people who don't want to hear what I am saying are not going to hear what I am saying, and it's not a liberal or conservative thing. It's an extremist thing. There are so-called conservatives who are trying merely to convince us of their virtuousness, and there are so-called liberals who are trying merely to convince

us of theirs. I don't think this is really about sex, however. It's about the ability and willingness of people in our culture today to evaluate what they are told on the basis of evidence rather than what one is told by whatever authority or popularized by whatever peer group.

Lehmiller: We are in the midst of a "replication crisis" in psychology—and science more broadly—and there's a lot of talk about the need for reforms in the way that we approach research. What's one thing that needs to change in the way that we conduct sex research, or what do you think sex researchers need to do differently going forward?

Cantor: There is, of course, a lot of bad research. There are underfunded ideas, overtaxed professors, and trainees who don't really want to do research, yet who are forced to come up with *anything* in order to graduate. There are also people who have such strong convictions about what they want the answer to be that they are unable to read the evidence in front of them. But, all that said, I think the real problem is that there are not enough sex researchers. If you think it's a problem that so many ideas turn out wrong when checked, just imagine how many of the *unchecked* ideas are wrong!

Lehmiller: Last question--if you're a sex researcher, people tend to assume that you know everything there is to know about sex. However, the truth of the matter is that no one does—like everyone else, we're all constantly learning. Tell us about one new thing you recently learned about sex that absolutely fascinated you.

Cantor: That sex doesn't end at 50.

Dr. Justin Lehmiller is an award winning educator and a prolific researcher and scholar. He has published articles in some of the leading journals on sex and relationships, written two textbooks, and produces the popular blog, **Sex & Psychology**. Dr. Lehmiller's research topics include casual sex, sexual fantasy, sexual health, and friends with benefits. He is currently the Director of the Social Psychology Graduate Program and an Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at Ball State University.

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